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Soviets store grain for wartime

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WASHINGTON — The Soviet Union, even as it spends scarce foreign exchange to buy up millions of tons of grain from the United States and other producers, is maintaining massive war reserves of grain inside concrete underground bunkers on the outskirts of its major cities, according to new intelligence.

Well-placed sources say these stocks are

considered untouchable in peacetime. They may not be drawn down, even in the face of poor harvests, heavy grain export commitments to Soviet block countries, or the necessity of slaughtering livestock for lack of adequate supplies of feed.

This discovery, which has been made only over the last few months, is raising questions in Washington about the seriousness with which the Soviet Union appears to be making active preparations for the possibility that deterrence might fail and a major war might be the result.

Some American analysts chalk the stockpiling up to Russian paranoia, or the momentum of Russia's civil defense bureaucracy carrying out its assigned task apart from any larger strategy.

Others are concerned that, when viewed in the context of a continuing Soviet buildup of strategic and tactical forces and extensive civil defense preparations, it might suggest the Kremlin has decided to get into position to exercise a bolder foreign policy, confident that its stronger relative position to wage nuclear war would persuade others to back down in possible confrontations.

Knowledgeable sources say that as recently as last spring, a Central Intelligence Agency projection of this year's Soviet wheat and corn harvest failed to take account of grain war reserves.

CIA analysts reportedly said they had no evidence of large bunkered war reserves, as opposed to normal operating stocks kept in grain elevators and open storage.

Sources say, however, that CIA Director George Bush, when he was head of the US liaison mission in Peking, had passed reports from the Chinese that the Russians were hoarding large stocks of grain for wartime purposes. This was part of a determined Chinese effort to convince the US that the Russian threat should be taken more seriously.

Recalling such reports, sources say, Bush directed CIA analysts to take another look at the Russian war stocks.

After interviewing a number of Russian emigres, the CIA found one source who provided first-hand knowledge and a detailed description of a large underground grain repository.

An extensive review of old reconnaissance satellite photos was conducted, turning up similar underground grain bunkers on the outskirts of 36 cities throughout the Soviet Union. Estimated capacity of those bunkers ran into the millions of tons. At that point, the search of satellite photos was terminated.

A typical grain bunker is said to look like a solid field of concrete, covering an area equivalent to three or more football fields, the flat surface marred only by air vents.

Such storage facilities are said to feature above ground grain elevators, large heater-dryers, conveyer belts, and several large low warehouses — the whole complex surrounded by barbed wire fences. Freight cars periodically haul in fresh grain and take out older grain to guard against extensive spoilage, sources say.

It is estimated that the identified underground bunkers contain about two million metric tons of grain and the associated warehouses house another four to six million tons. Sources say there is every reason to believe there are numerous similar facilities not yet pinpointed.

A recent book published by the Center for Advanced International Studies at the University of Miami, titled "War Survival in Soviet Strategy," contains some speculation on war reserves.